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Why Teacher Voice Matters

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By Richard D. Kahlenberg, Halley Potter

Research shows that when teachers are engaged in school decisions and collaborate with administrators and each other, school climate improves. This promotes a better learning environment for students, which raises student achievement, and a better working environment for teachers, which reduces teacher turnover.

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Stronger School Climate. Research finds a high level of teacher voice has positive effects on school climate. Richard Ingersoll, an expert on teacher workplace issues, describes teachers as people “in the middle,” “caught between the contradictory demands and needs of their superordinates—principals—and their subordinates—students.”¹ When teachers have the right amount of control, Ingersoll argues, they are able to do their job successfully, earning respect from principals, coworkers, and students.

Looking at data from the Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics Schools and Staffing Survey, Ingersoll found that as teacher control in “social decisions” (such as student discipline and teacher professional development policies) increases, the amount of conflict between students and staff, among teachers, and between teachers and the principal all decrease.² As he summarized in a later article, “Schools in which teachers have more control over key schoolwide and classroom decisions have fewer problems with student misbehavior, show more collegiality and cooperation among teachers

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and administrators, have a more committed and engaged teaching staff, and do a better job of retaining their teachers.”³

Increased Student Achievement. Not surprisingly, evidence suggests that having a strong teacher culture also improves student performance. Valerie Lee and Julia Smith measured the effects of teachers’ work conditions and school climate on student achievement using longitudinal data tracking individual student learning gains from eighth to tenth grade.⁴ They found that, after controlling for student and school characteristics, student achievement is higher across all subjects when teachers take collective responsibility for student learning and when the staff is more cooperative. The study also showed that schools with high levels of collective responsibility and staff cooperation had more equitable distributions of student gains across socioeconomic status (SES)—lower-SES students in these schools tended to have gains on par with the gains of higher-SES students. Promoting collective responsibility and cooperation among teachers, then, may improve student outcomes and reduce achievement gaps.

Research on effective school organization also finds that collaboration, which is one manifestation of teacher voice, is an important component of school quality. One prominent recent example is the impressive 15-year longitudinal study produced by the Consortium on Chicago School Research. This study of hundreds of elementary schools in Chicago found that one of the organizational features that distinguished schools showing academic improvement from struggling schools was intense staff collaboration coupled with strong professional development. Furthermore, researchers found that building strong relational trust among teachers and administrators was crucial to school improvement.⁵ Greg Anrig recently synthesized research on collaboration and school organization in his book *Beyond the Education Wars*. He found that “one of the most important ingredients in successful schools is the inverse of conflict: intensive collaboration among administrators and teachers, built on a shared sense of mission and focused on improved student learning.”⁶

Reduced Teacher Turnover. Schools with high levels of teacher voice also have less teacher turnover. Ingersoll found that higher levels of teacher control in social and instructional areas are associated with lower

teacher turnover rates. Schools with low levels of teacher control in social areas had an average turnover rate of 19 percent, compared with just 4 percent for those with a high level of teacher control in social areas. A smaller, but still significant, difference in turnover rates was associated with control in instructional areas: the turnover rate for schools with a low level of teacher control in instructional areas was 11 percent, compared with 7 percent for those with a high level of teacher control in that area.⁷

Controlling teacher turnover matters because excessive turnover consumes financial resources, disrupts students' learning, and reduces the number of highly effective, experienced teachers. Each time a teacher leaves and must be replaced, schools face financial costs associated with advertising and recruitment, special incentives for new hires, administrative processing, and training for new employees. A 2007 study of five districts found that the costs of turnover varied widely—from around \$4,000 per teacher leaving the Jemez Valley Public Schools district in New Mexico, to almost \$18,000 per teacher who left Chicago Public Schools.⁸ Based on these estimates and a national average teacher turnover rate of 12.5 percent, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future estimates that the overall cost of teacher turnover in the United States is \$7.34 billion per year.⁹ In an average urban district, these costs break down to \$70,000 per school per year to cover the costs of teachers leaving that school, plus an additional \$8,750 spent to replace each teacher leaving the district.

Teacher turnover also disrupts the school community and hurts student achievement. Research shows that more-effective teachers are more likely to stay in teaching,¹⁰ so teacher turnover could theoretically improve student achievement if less-effective teachers are replaced with more-effective ones. However, research on the effects of actual turnover show that it can have the opposite effect on student learning. A study of fourth- and fifth-grade students in New York City found that students performed worse when teacher turnover within their grade-level team was higher.¹¹ The effects were most pronounced for students in grades where all of the teachers were new to the school, but there were also smaller effects observed for students in grades where some of the teachers were new hires. Notably, the harmful effects of teacher

turnover were two to four times greater in schools with higher proportions of black students and low-achieving students. In low-achieving schools, even students with teachers who had stayed at the school were harmed by having turnover among other teachers in the school. This finding suggests that teacher turnover can have negative schoolwide effects that extend beyond individual classrooms.

Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, is the author or editor of several books, including Rewarding Strivers: Helping Low-Income Students Succeed in College; Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles Over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy; and All Together Now: Creating Middle-Class Schools through Public School Choice. Halley Potter is a fellow at the Century Foundation and a former charter school teacher. This article is excerpted from Richard D. Kahlenberg and Halley Potter, A Smarter Charter: Finding What Works for Charter Schools and Public Education (New York: Teachers College Press). Reprinted with permission of the publisher. Copyright © 2014 by Richard D. Kahlenberg and Halley Potter. All rights reserved.

Endnotes

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